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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

10 February 1986

China Builds a Better Tank...the Israeli Way

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Summary

Israeli defense industry technicians, working in China, are helping the Chinese to produce a main battle tank that is far superior to any in their present inventory. Since series production began seven months ago, more than 250 of the improved tanks--equipped with Israel's version of a British-designed 105-mm main gun and an advanced fire-control system--have rolled off the assembly lines at China's foremost tank plant. Although the tank is not likely to alter the Soviet Union's significant numerical advantage in tanks along the Sino-Soviet border, the potential for the transfer of additional Israeli technology may ultimately press Moscow toward expensive force upgrades in the Far East to preserve its qualitative edge.

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This memorandum was prepared by Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 10 February 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Defense Issues Branch, China Division, OEA,

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Production Begins

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This production is intended to allow the Chinese to assimilate the new technology and establish a production base. Initial fielding of the tanks will almost certainly be along the northern border, where Chinese infantry forces armed with some 5,500 tanks face highly mechanized Soviet ground force divisions armed with about 14,000 tanks.

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China's first major weapons purchase, [redacted] was signed in mid-1983 and included a contract to upgrade China's main battle tanks [redacted]. A modified tank was exhibited in Beijing in August 1983, [redacted].

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Israel is uniquely qualified to establish a successful military relationship with China and upgrade Chinese armor. Israel has retrofitted for its own use roughly 400 Soviet T-54/55 tanks--on which the Chinese Type 59 tank is based--captured during the 1973 war with 105-mm L7 main guns, new engines, and standard Israeli fire-control systems. The Chinese appreciate Israeli [redacted] willingness to work without political strings or bureaucratic entanglements. [redacted]

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Subsequently, firepower improvements will be produced as kits. China's current fleet of some 6,000 Type 59 and Type 69 tanks¹ will then be retrofitted with the

¹ China has some 9,000 tanks in its inventory. But almost 3,000 of these are old T-34 tanks and lighter Type 62 and Type 63 tanks, which will not be retrofitted with the Israeli kits. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

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improved components at major repair facilities throughout China. Tanks currently deployed in China's northern military regions probably will have first priority in the improvement program. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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New Life for an Old Tank

Our assessment of the characteristics of the M1984-1 is largely derived from photography taken of prototypes appearing [REDACTED] parade in Beijing. The tank looks almost identical to China's older Type 59 tank² but incorporates the following new features:

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[REDACTED]

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² A second version of an improved Type 59 tank was also seen in the [REDACTED] parade. This tank had the Israeli main gun and Western-style treads, but lacked other improvements. [REDACTED]

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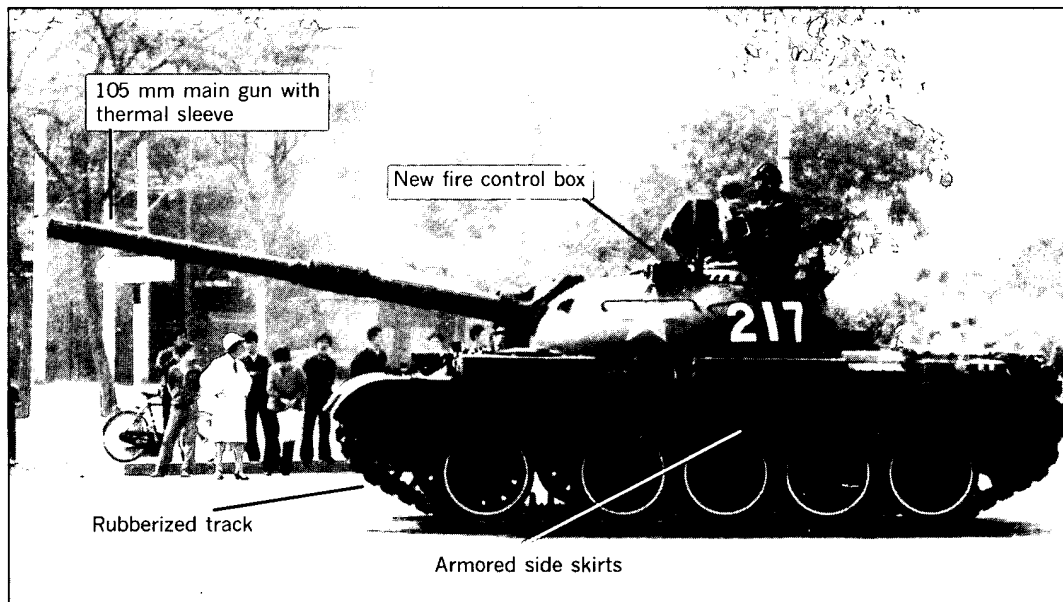
[REDACTED] Production of tanks without advanced optics or fire-control systems would be a less expensive upgrade but would undercut some of the advantages of replacing the original Soviet-designed main gun. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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China's M1984-1 Tank



China's Type 59 Tank



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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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* Modernized T-55 and T-62 tanks can probably launch ATGMs. Kill probabilities with standard ammunition are probably comparable to those of China's M1984-1.

[REDACTED]

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Implications for the Sino-Soviet Armor Balance

If China builds the [REDACTED] tanks planned for in the Israeli contract and retrofits its remaining 6,000 Type 59 tanks with the new systems, the qualitative armor edge now held by Soviet forces along the border will be temporarily reduced. The improved Chinese tank is superior in range and accuracy to the standard T-54/55 and T-62 tanks that make up over 90 percent of Soviet tanks facing China. Moscow has, however, initiated a tank modernization program--adding new armor, a new fire control system,

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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and an antitank missile-guided firing capability to these older tanks--that will restore the Soviet tanks' advantage at extended ranges. [REDACTED]

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Soviet T-72s are superior to even the improved Chinese tanks, but few are deployed against China. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Soviets have only some 600 T-72s along the Chinese front, however, because Moscow has perceived little reason to modernize its tank forces against an adversary equipped with 1950s-vintage tanks. Moscow could respond to Chinese tank upgrades by more rapidly replacing the older tanks with T-72s, but the Soviets will be hard pressed to do this while maintaining current deployment rates against NATO. Moreover, even if China deploys [REDACTED] newly built tanks along the Soviet front, Moscow would retain its advantage of about 14,000 tanks facing some 6,500 Chinese tanks along the Soviet front. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

The Soviets, therefore, probably are less concerned about the current improvement packages than about other improvements Israeli armor experts can offer China.³ Soviet tank superiority, for example, depends heavily on the thin armor of Chinese tanks, but Israel is a leader in reactive and composite armor development. Although the M1984-1 cannot be retrofitted with sufficient armor to match the Soviet T-72, Israeli technicians are probably helping the Chinese design new, better protected tanks that could cut deeply into the Soviet advantage. Similarly, China is likely to benefit from Israeli development of a 120-mm main gun and higher horsepower tank engines. [REDACTED]

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³ With articles on the Israeli refit of Chinese tanks appearing in Western military publications, Moscow is almost certainly aware of, and targeting intelligence collection against, the program. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Indeed, as the Chinese-Israeli military relationship flourishes, Moscow probably will be forced to increase defense allocations to the Far East if it wishes to maintain its tank superiority. Chinese military obsolescence until now has allowed the Soviets to concentrate on producing modern weapons for the NATO front and to field less capable, less expensive weapons against China. But if China procures advanced systems, such as the Israeli MAPATS antitank missile, Moscow will be hard pressed to maintain its comfortable advantage. While Moscow could potentially counter this development, it will inevitably require a great outlay of funds at a time when Moscow is also trying to maintain its advantage over NATO forces. [REDACTED]

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Export Potential

While we believe Beijing's highest priority is to field the tank with Chinese armor units, China is likely to export some of the first tanks produced. The Chinese military, in fact, would benefit from overseas sales that help lower production costs, recoup the technology acquisition outlays, and provide additional foreign exchange for new military imports. China's biggest customer for tanks, however, has been Iraq, and Israel may have stipulations in the coproduction agreement calling for consultation before allowing exports deemed sensitive by Tel Aviv. Other possibilities--but for smaller orders--include Thailand and Pakistan. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]--probably no more than 50 tanks--would receive priority over deployment in Chinese units. Pakistan, which already fields Chinese Type 59 tanks, may also be interested in some M1984-1 tanks. [REDACTED]

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